FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES: ELIAS CANETTI, JEWISH MEMORIES AND THE NEW EUROPE

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...It would be hard to give a full picture of the colourful time of those years in Ruschuk, the passions and the terrors. Anything I subsequently experienced had already happened in Ruschuk.
Elias Canetti, The Tongue Set Free[1]

»Identity« and »Memory« have been recurrent themes in the intellectual life of Europe. Today, as the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans are reconnecting to Europe and to each other, they are also confronting aspects of their past by bringing with them ›old‹ histories in this process. At the heart of it, in the West as well as in the East, there remains ›the Jewish question‹ – the common ground for Europe's shared fate during the Second World War.

This essay is about the life of the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe and the Balkans in the mid-1990s. I travelled there to see for myself what was left of the Jewish communities and how they related to the new political realities after the end of communism. I travelled along the river Danube, starting from Hungary, crossing Romania and ending in Bulgaria. I was inspired by Elias Canetti's book *The Tongue Set Free: Remembrance of a European Childhood*, a memoir about the writer's early years in Bulgaria. The essay reflects on Canetti's discussion about fragmentation and unity in the European identity of the twentieth century.

Budapest

My journey started in the city with the largest Jewish community in Eastern Europe. Budapest is still a home to about eighty thousands Jews, although the exact number is unknown. On the first evening of my visit, a Hungarian Jewish friend invited me to a concert at the Jewish Cultural Centre. A Viennese band was singing in German. With us was an English colleague from London, who was truly bewildered: »Why are they singing in German?«, he kept asking. I explained to him that before the Second World War, German was the language of many secularly educated Jews in Eastern Europe. »But I thought all this was long ago«, he answered. I thought that he might be right.

At the Jewish community centre, some people still spoke German and asked me if I knew Hebrew. I didn't. Besides, it seemed to me just as difficult as Hungarian. So we managed in English. There was also a modest exhibition by a local painter, whom our guide compared to another Eastern European Jewish artist: »This is a little bit like Chagall, no?« »Perhaps«, I nodded hesitantly.

The Hungarian Jews seemed to me like a divided community after the fall of communism. There were those who were accused of having served the communist authorities during the Cold War and those who saw themselves untouched by the regime. But what seemed to be connecting them was the overwhelming presence of Israel. The talk of the day was travels, studies, relatives, and business in the Holy Land.

At the centre of the old Jewish town there was an old, largesynagogue that is still in use. The ancient Jewish sites in Buda were well preserved too. László, a professor in politics at Budapest University was proud to show me around his house: »This is a typical Jewish architecture with its spacious and rounded entrance, and the glass doors.« he explained.

He also told me that the older generation of Hungarian Jews still lit candles to commemorate the memory of Raul Wallenberg, who saved many Jews from the Holocaust. Thus the Jewish features of Budapest appeared to lie not only in memories but also in a living continuation of the past.

Cluj

The Keleti train station in Budapest was once the Austro-Hungarian empire's gateway to the East. When I was there, the majority of travellers I saw were Hungarians from Romania, European students and Roma people. I took the train to the city of Cluj in Romania. On the journey, we passed through Transylvania, where the air was crisp and the scenery very green. I got off at what had historically been the heart of Hungarian life in Romania.

1 Canetti, Elias: The Tongue Set Free: Remembrance of a European Childhood. Trans. by Joachim Neugrouschel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1979.

However, there I stumbled upon Germans still living in Romania, though most of the community members had left the country after 1989. At the German cultural centre, I met Wilfried, who spoke a very correct and somewhat old-fashioned German. He told me how after the Second World War, the Russians sent his father to Siberia: »This ring is all I have left from him«, he said. During the communist time, Romanian Germans were permitted to walk under Ceausescu's portrait during national parades, but not to march. We had nothing more to say to each other about the Holocaust or about the Siberian camps. »The German chorus in Cluj is small but very good«, said Wilfried and showed me the awards and pictures displayed on the walls of the centre.

His father's ring was classically simple, with engraved stones in a square pattern. It reminded me of a Jewish friend of mine from Bulgaria, whose father was also a German, and a Jew, and who had given her a very similar ring. Judy told me once how her father escaped from Nazism to Bulgaria and how, fourty years later, she went back to Germany to escape from communism. She now lives in America, but she still speaks German to her children. Both stories seemed to me sad and somehow connected. For something of Jewish life in Eastern Europe and its affiliation to the German culture feels lost forever.

Bucharest

It is not Dracula's ghost that has been haunting Romania, but Ceausescu's industrial designs. The landscape on the way to Bucharest changed dramatically: there were dilapidating industrial buildings, huge, empty and rusting warehouses, and abandoned homes.

Once in the Romanian capital, Oana, a university lecturer in journalism, gave me the obligatory tour featuring the site of Ceausescu's last public speech, the bullet-hole marked buildings around, the unbelievably large People's Palace erected at the centre of the city. We spoke about Romanian politics and literature, the housing crisis and the rising taxi fares. Oana did not like the way modern Romania was presented abroad: »This is what they show in the West all of the time«, she said pointing to a group of Roma children, and continued outraged »but they are not exactly Romanian, are they?«

We walked together down to central Bucharest, which is proudly called »little Paris« by its inhabitants. Since I did not want to disappoint her and the Romanian intelligentsia as a whole, I did not say anything about the fact that the architecture I saw was rather pseudo-Italian. While having an ice cream in an equally pseudo-Viennese coffee shop, I asked her if she was going to marry her boyfriend. »Oh, no! I can't even introduce him to my parents. He is Jewish. Our relationship is secret. But he is very intelligent, a real intellectual, you know.« I nodded in agreement.

I found the old Jewish quarter in Bucharest occupied by Roma people. It was poor and filthy. The Star of David could still be noticed on some houses and the main synagogue was nearby. »This is not a nice part of our town«, my friend said, »Let's go and I will show you where the intellectuals live.« I followed her.

Russe

I was impatient to get to my final destination – the Danube port of Russe in Bulgaria. It was once an Ottoman gateway to Europe. On arrival, the railway station was very noisy. It was also a polyglot market Balkan style. Crowds of men shouted currency prices in all kinds of Balkan languages. They offered Bulgarian money in exchange to Hungarian, Romanian, Russian, or Macedonian. Some counted loudly while others waved greasy banknotes to the train. Suddenly, two custom officers shut the train doors, grabbed the pile of passports and disappeared. The passengers – both arriving and departing – were thrown into confusion. But after a short moment of restful silence the uproar started again.

In 1915, Elias Canetti got off at this very station to visit his native Ruschuk, as the town was then called. His mother was an ambitious and educated woman, who identified two reasons for the mannerless border control: the incurable Balkan harshness and the Turkish passports that the family had kept after the collapse of the Empire. In his memoirs *The Tongue Set Free*, Canetti wrote about his early awareness of the national passions that divided the old Ottoman lands. The Balkan Jews preferred the imperial world, which allowed them to travel and trade in a cosmopolitan way. Many were scared by the Empire's dismantling and the partitioning of people and territories that followed.

Canetti's family moved to Western Europe, but Canetti never forgot those years when people in his hometown spoke Bulgarian, Greek, Romanian, Russian, Turkish, Armenian, and

Roma. His grandfather liked to walk around Vienna and shock the *cognoscenti* that he who lived in Russe could converse in seventeen languages. Canetti translated mysteriously and unconsciously into German the Bulgarian fairy tales and the family celebrations conducted in the old Sephardic language Ladino. The translation was flawless. George Steiner called Canetti's writing »the purest, most classical German written in our time«. However, it made me wonder whether it was this linguistic diversity that challenged the writer's concept of unity. Or was it rather the sense of the general fragmentation of the Balkans that had led him to the conclusion that humans are dangerously, and desperately struggling for wholeness. Canetti asked himself: »I consist of many people whom I am not at all aware of. But do I want to?«[2]

When his parents decided to leave Russe, this uncultured provincial dump where people didn't have the foggiest clue what was going on in Europe, grandfather Canetti showered the child with hot tears while cursing his son, who indeed died soon after the family moved to Manchester. For the rest of his life, Canetti tried to interpret the quest for togetherness as a resistance to death. He knew that the dissolution of the empire and the scattering of his own family were painful. But he also thought that the unity demanded by the slogans of National Socialism and Communism were far more damaging. Yet he never solved the conundrum about what made one happier: monolithic or diverse identity?

I found the Jewish Community Centre in Russe, *Shalom*, comfortably settled inside an old synagogue, which under communism had been used as a storehouse. There I had coffee with Irena, who runs the place. She told me that among the regulars there were a businessman from the US and a Russian. They both liked to talk about Jews and the KGB. Her *shiaddai*, a Jewish pendant, glittered in the sunshine. »It is from Israel« she said proudly, »I was there on a Hebrew language course.« The remark reminded me of the conversations in the Budapest Jewish centre and I felt hopeful about finding some continuities during my trip.

Russe's elegance was somewhat disordered and soaked in summer tranquillity. It still had the feel of being an Ottoman province, as at the time Canetti's family had left. One could also see touches of a pseudo-Habsburg style in the architecture. But above all it was an unmistakably post-communist Bulgarian town with small merchandise sellers, smoky coffee shops and many exchange bureaus. There was a mood of a pleasant detachment in this southern Danubian corner. Walking around the old Jewish *mahala* (quarter) revealed some changes – it was inhabited by Roma. This was vaguely similar to Bucharest, which excited me, as I was able to find another regional connection.

»Take a picture of me too«, requested an elderly man after showing me the Jewish ornaments of his terrace. Around the corner, another old synagogue was being reconstructed. This one was going to become an evangelical church. But the new occupiers were kind and said that they would keep the old engraved ceiling. I was also told that during the 1970's, the communists erected a Bulgarian memorial where the old Jewish cemetery used to be. »Don't take these things too seriously«, advised my companion, a native from Russe, worried that I might have read too much into these transformations.

I arrived at Canetti's house on a summer Sunday afternoon. It was not a touristy place and the neighbourhood was napping. The narrow streets hid their introverted residents, who were neither surprised nor intrigued by occasional visitors like me. There was nothing they could tell me about Canetti's house.

Canetti was not popular in his native Bulgaria. The communists didn't want to know about his masterpiece of social theory, *Crowds and Power* (first published in German in 1960)[3], with its insights into the catastrophic direction that mass action and anonymous equality could take. When he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981, the Bulgarian authorities didn't want to confuse their socialist citizens with Canetti's knotty life and kept the announcement short. The National Heritage paid respect to him by listing the house I saw as a memorial. But the neighbours told me that in fact it had been demolished and that the sign on the wall was wrong.

Bulgarians are very proud that no Jews from Bulgaria were sent to concentration camps during the war. How, why, and who exactly saved them remains a disputed point. Was it the anti-fascist resistance, as the communist's claim, or the Bulgarian king, or the Bulgarian people themselves? And then, why did they leave en masse to Israel after the war?

Back in the Jewish Centre, I heard a story about the Jewish exodus from Russe. There was a lady known as Madam Rozanes, who had a son. He had left for Israel in the 1940's. Their house was nationalised and consequently used as offices by the Bulgarian Communist Youth Organization, the Hunting and Fishing Association, a clinic, and the Town Hall's wedding service. After the Communist regime had fallen in 1989, everybody abandoned it. Madam Roza-

2 Canetti, Elias: Notes from Hampstead: The Writer's Notes 1954-1971. Trans. by John Hargraves. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1994.

3 Canetti, Elias: Crowds and Power. Trans. by Carol Stewart. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1982.

nes had died years ago and there was nobody there to reclaim the property. The Viennese ornaments were dilapidating, the windows were broken and the house seemed reconciled to living in silence and former grandeur. Maybe one day the son who left for Israel would come back to open the locked gate.

The building next door revealed another story. Before the war, it had belonged to a wealthy Jewish merchant of Russe, known by his surname Ventura. His daughter Ani was killed in the resistance at the age of eighteen. For some time, the post-war Bulgarian history praised her as a heroine of the underground Communist movement. But later on, her name faded away from the books while the party was unifying and cleansing its memory. For Ani's story was too muddled. At the *Shalom*, some said that Ventura had expelled his daughter from home because she was in love with Isidor, who was a poor Jewish communist and so she died forsaken. Others believed that she had eloped with him, but soon afterwards was killed by mistake – instead of him. The old ladies were still bewildered: »How could a Jewish father renounce his own daughter!«

But who could tell whether Ani was a fighter killed in the struggle for justice or a victim of an unfortunate love story, or both? I couldn't find the answer in other people's memories, even if they had lived during the same times and were of the same faith, because they were only reconstructing their own reality, which most probably violated the truth in Canetti's terms.

Canetti wrote that the only decent response to the many questions which history and identity pose was to accept human fragmentation. Canetti believed that connections and disconnections were normal, whereas unity and coherence were forced upon us: »...Perhaps I am striving too much for a lost unity; perhaps – even in my work – I should let myself disintegrate into its component parts...«[4]

That was the end of my trip. I felt that the reckoning with the past was something different in Eastern Europe and the Balkans than it was in the West. The Cold War and the Communist rule had muted the recovery of Jewish memories there. But the end of it enabled people to think more accurately the dimensions of their own memories and rethink the nature of the interconnections among each other. Yet in search of the true story, I found forgotten and fragmented personal and political histories rather than coherent explorations of fully lived lives.

4 Canetti 1994.

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She worked as a producer at the BBC World Service (1992-2000) and as a teaching assistant in Politics and Government in Eastern Europe (1945-1992) at SSEES. Since 2000 she has been working as a political consultant on EU and NATO enlargement at the Federal Trust for Education & Research and on defence and security issues at Ashbourne Beaver Associates based in Westminster, London, UK.